Part Two

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The LURE of PERIL

Dix Morgan The Fighting Engineer

By Captain Fritz Duquesne.

"THE invention ought to save the railroad companies from eighty to ninety million dollars a year. Why it was not thought of before I can't imagine. So far I can find no faults or flaws in the thing. Instead of tearing up all the rails that have cost us $30 a ton, and shipping them back to the mills, and selling them for ten dollars a ton, we can use the same rails over again without taking them away from the track." The consulting engineer of one of the largest railroad interests in the United States was addressing the board of directors in their offices in the Terminal Building, New York, and explaining to them the meaning of the white drawings of the blue prints in his hands.

"Who invented the device?"

"J. Dix Morgan, a native of South Carolina, a practical railroad engineer who has put down the steel highways of civilization in almost every part of the world, and under the most heroic and trying circumstances. He is known to his friends as the 'Fighting Engineer.' He got his idea when building a railroad for the Japanese under the fire of the Russian guns in Manchuria, during the Russo-Japanese war. In the campaign he had to use second-hand and defective material, and whilst thinking out various makeshifts for the road he was building he made a mental note of what he would do when he had the time, and this invention is the outcome of time, that he was forced to have, through one of the worst calamities that can befall a man."

An office boy entered and handed the speaker a card.

"Show him right in."

All eyes turned to the door as a broad-shouldered man, over six feet in height, entered, led over the silent carpet by a woman whose head reached his shoulders. The big man held his hat in his hand and apparently regarded space as he slowly turned and faced a wall behind him, whilst the woman pushed a chair toward him. "The gentlemen are on the other side, my dear, this way," and she turned him around with gentle hands to face the directors. "My husband is blind," she said, a sad smile playing round her eyes as they looked into those of the sightless man before her, as she slowly guided him into the chair.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Morgan and to Mr. John Dix Morgan, the inventor, whose machine this is," said the consulting engineer as he pointed to the prints on the table.

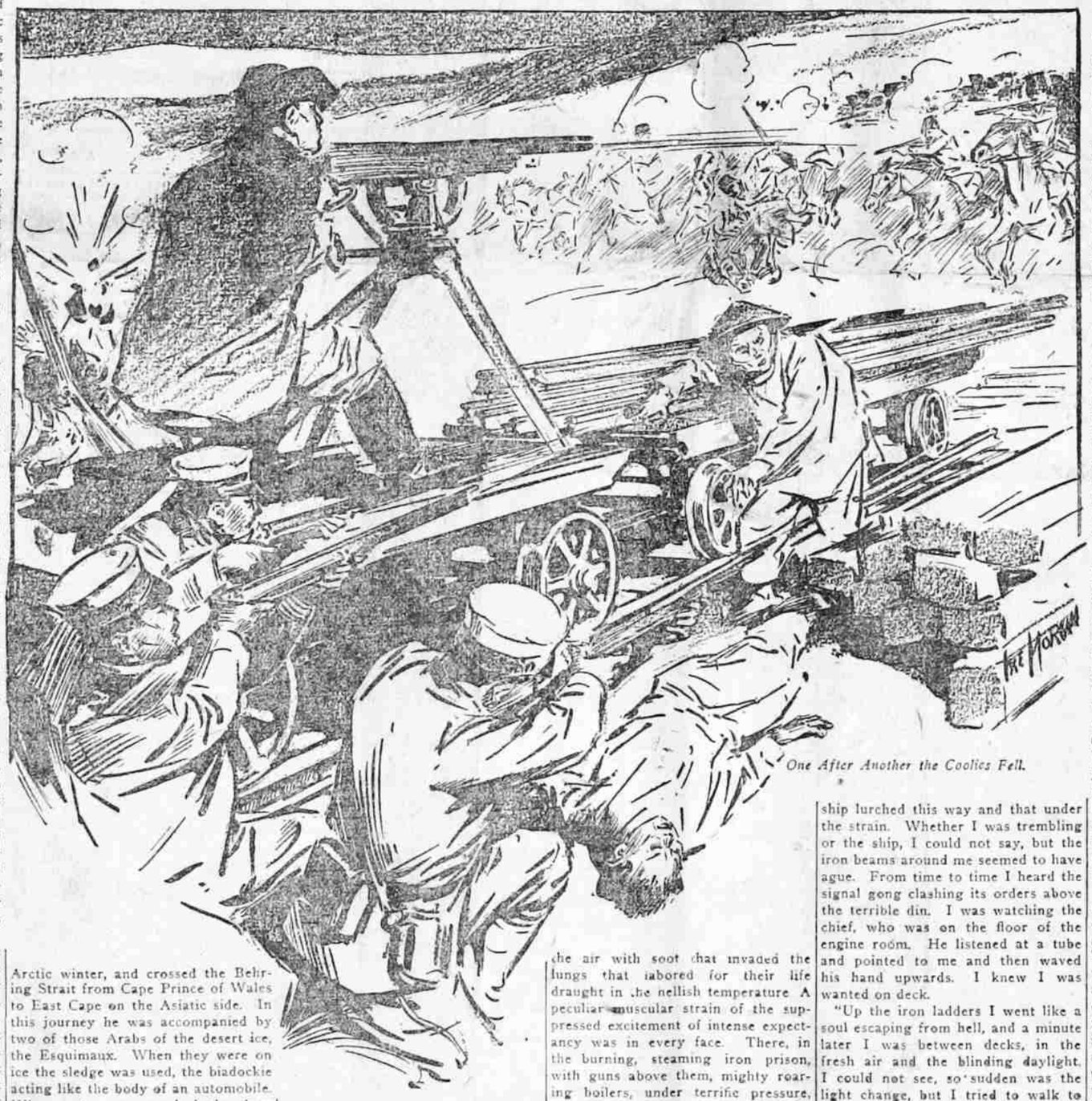
They all bowed, and then the talk became one of dollars, miles of track, minutes and hours, savings, speeds, costs, etc., which are business and are not going to enter into this snatch from the biography of a man who has been led by the lure of peril into all kinds of dangerous ventures, which have left him a mass of scars, breaks and twists, such as I have never before in a great amount of experience, seen a man survive.

As he sat in the chair before the smooth-faced business men the glare of the office light showed plainly the many scars that marked his features. Over his right eye there was the gash of a bullet's cruel path. On the left side of his face there were eleven shot marks. One eye had been shot out and the other blinded. His left hand hung in a semi-helpless manner at his side, and he seemed to have no shoulder for his arm to hang on. And yet this man seems to enjoy life, and is as happy as a boy who has found his first sweetheart. Blind and crippled, with the light of heaven shut from his mind, he had to give up his perilous life, but not his adventure, for now he adventures in the dark and builds machines and mechanical things that he hopes will add a little to his wealth, and a lot to human comfort.

Wherever there was danger John Dix Morgan was in it; in it for money, or in it for fun; but in it, if he could reach it. If he was not occupied in fighting or exploring he would be prospecting somewhere for some precious metal, or building a railroad in South America, Mexico, East Indies, China or Japan. In the fifty-odd years of his life he has visited most of the gold fields of the world, from the tropics of Central America and East India to the Frozen North. For seventeen months he prospected for gold on the Mackenzie River, which runs through Northwest Canada into the Arctic Ocean. He has the honor of being the only prospector who traversed the river from one end to the other. He lived with the Esquimaux and learned their mode of life, which he adopted in his further search for gold in the Arctic. Being unsuccessful he decided to go to Siberia to try his luck there. Most men would have gone down the west coast to some seaport from whence a steamboat could be taken to the other side of the Pacific, but not Dix Morgan. Always unconventional and ever in search of a new excitement he decided to cross from the American Continent to Asia in his own way, reversing the journey of the Mongols who crossed from Asia to America in the distant ages. He journeyed across Alaska behind dogs in a three-hole biadockie lashed to a sledge, in the depth of the Arctic winter, and crossed the Behring Strait from Cape Prince of Wales to East Cape on the Asiatic side. In this journey he was accompanied by two of those Arabs of the desert ice, the Esquimaux. When they were on ice the sledge was used, the biadockie acting like the body of an automobile. When water was reached the dogs were put inside the biadockie which was slid into the water and paddled by the Esquimaux to the next ice, the sledge hanging underneath.

In eighteen hours the journey from the American continent to the Asiatic was made, and then the search for the precious yellow metal was continued. While it was still cold and the ice was thick, and the ground too frozen to be worked, Morgan journeyed from one tribe to the other in search for evidences of gold or silver, and when the summer suns melted the snow he prospected all the likely country, but to no avail, the search proved fruitless besides eating up an enormous amount of money. Morgan decided to return to his home in the United States.

He was in Shanghai, on his road home, when he was engaged by a European syndicate to make a survey for a proposed Trans-Asiatic railway, and he has the honor of making the first survey for a railroad north of the Arctic Circle.



One After Another the Coolies Fell.

About this time there was a growing hostility between the Chinese and Japanese governments, which resulted in the Chino-Japanese conflict. John Dix Morgan rushed his railroad work and finished it before war broke out.

The Japanese were very short of engineers and having heard of Morgan's ability, engaged him as an advisory agent to one of their naval commanders at two hundred yen (one hundred dollars) a day. While in this capacity he was obliged to go from ship to ship of the Japanese fleet arranging this, looking over that, repairing everything, suggesting changes.

When the fleet was ready for action the Japanese government ordered it to attack the Chinese fleet at once. Morgan was asked to leave the ships before the expected battle. He refused, saying, "I've started and I'll see it out. I'd give two hundred yen a day to see the durned fight anyhow." So he remained with the fleet and went into action with it at the battle of Yalu. Before and during the fighting he was called from ship to ship to look over the various mechanical devices that make the modern marine fighting machine, for at that time the Japanese were in their infancy, as far as naval matters were concerned, and they needed considerable help.

Morgan was in the engine room of the Komura when the opening shot of the historic battle was fired. Here is his own description of what it means to be in the bowels of a battleship in action.

"We were in full view of the Chinese fleet, which we could see through our glasses was clearing for action. The guns in the enemy's turrets were changing their angles and I expected any minute to see the death dealing shells come screeching from the threatening muzzles. Our own craft were preparing for the fray. Signals were flashed from ship to ship. The gunners stripped themselves naked, a necessary condition, for in explosions the canvas and other material of clothing is likely to be blown into the flesh, thus causing infection. The Japanese were maneuvering to a good position favorable for the delivery of a broadside when some sharp signals came up from the engine room. They were translated to me in a moment by a Japanese officer and I went flying down the narrow ringing iron steps with the agility of a gorilla. Standing on the iron grating around the cylinders, with their mighty plunging piston rods, were the Japanese engineers, holding a rapid conversation. The ship's engines were throbbing like the heart of some mighty monster in the excitement of an approaching death duel. The inanimate things around us seemed to take on the spirit of battle. The electric lights flickered nervously, and the oilers with their long spouted cans and smoky lamps sprang from bearing to bearing like agitated monkeys. Orders were shouted above the hissing of the steam and the rythmic groans of the living machinery. Greasy-brown faces with beady, glistening eyes shown from the dark places around the hot engines. Smoke rose from the oil wicks and clogged the air with soot that invaded the lungs that labored for their life draught in the hellish temperature. A peculiar muscular strain of the suppressed excitement of intense expectancy was in every face. There, in the burning, steaming iron prison, with guns above them, mighty roaring boilers, under terrific pressure, magazines packed to the top with deadly explosives all around them, and dangerous electric cables clinging like vines to the steel walls above, stood the little warriors of the engine room, unseen by their enemy and seeing him not. On every side lurked death in a hundred forms, waiting to be freed from its harness. The mighty steel arms rose and fell in answer to the signal bell as they drove the huge engine of destruction forward to its doom or victory.

"'What is wrong?' I asked the chief after I had surveyed the scene.

"'That's why I called you,' he answered, 'what is wrong? Next time the signal comes, "full speed," listen, there is a strange knocking which we cannot locate. I have my fears.'

"Just then 'full speed ahead' clanged on the gong, and the huge pistons shot nervously through their cylinders, automatically my practiced ear analyzed the myriad sounds around me, and I heard a strange little tap as the piston of the high pressure cylinders ended its stroke.

"'Where it is?' asked the chief anxiously.

"I threw the coat on top of the cylinder to protect me from the heat and the chief followed my example. I then sprang over the rail and kneeling over the hot plates listened. A moment later I knew that the danger was external and in another, located in the packing box a bolt whose nut had about a sixty-second of an inch play. A few minutes' work with a spanner rectified matters and the Japanese engineers smiled, and were thanking me when a muffled thud, following a signal to slow down, shook the ship. Again the thud and then a mighty boom. The Japanese in the engine room could restrain their feelings no longer, and they cried to each other, it seemed to me, in the joy of battle. Their eyes glistened and their teeth shone white in their grimy faces, but they themselves and others clung to the iron work like mad apes, laughing.

"Crash! Crash! Crash! came from the iron walls of the ship as she slightly reeled. Every moment I expected a shell to come screeching, splintering, crashing, blazing through the ship's side, scattering death and destruction. The din of the pattering shot, the vibration of the striking shells and the recoil of our own guns drove me dizzy as the huge battleship lurched this way and that under the strain. Whether I was trembling or the ship, I could not say, but the iron beams around me seemed to have ague. From time to time I heard the signal gong clashing its orders above the terrible din. I was watching the chief, who was on the floor of the engine room. He listened at a tube and pointed to me and then waved his hand upwards. I knew I was wanted on deck.

"Up the iron ladders I went like a soul escaping from hell, and a minute later I was between decks, in the fresh air and the blinding daylight. I could not see, so sudden was the light change, but I tried to walk to the bridge. I trod on something soft, living, and sprang back into some greasy substance and slipped on the deck. The shattering boom, the rattle of shot on the ship's side, the screech of big shells as they tried to grind into the ship's vitals, and the thunder thumps of our own guns that hurled defiance at the enemy, added to my temporary blindness, and for a few seconds rendered me incapable of thought. I clung to the deck and waited for my eyes to adjust themselves to the light. In a few moments I got used to my surroundings and saw around me a horrible scene of carnage that would sicken me in the telling.

"I decided to find out why I was wanted and so I made my way over the dead bodies and blood-greasy decks to the top deck. When I got there some twenty-five Japanese officers and men, and a couple of Europeans were watching the progress of the battle.

Already the Chinese ships were in distress. Most of their shots were falling short and sending geyser-like sprays from the sea, which settled like rain of a tropic storm upon us. A shell passed screeching over our heads, so close that the vacuum of its wake lifted some of us off our feet. An instant later another hit below us, putting a gun out of commission. A French officer beside me was getting enthusiastic, every time the Chinese made a good shot, he cried, 'Tres bien! Tres bien!' with such evident admiration that I could hardly think that he realized that he was a part of the target. Whilst I was watching a shell whisked one of the Japanese officers off the deck. I saw a splash, and where a man stood a millionth of a second before there was nothing.

"Oh! That's all I remembered. When I came to my senses I could see that out of all who were on the deck there was only one other besides myself alive. It was the Frenchman. Scattered around the deck were the broken bodies of the others who had watched the fighting with us. Blood was running from my mouth, my left arm was broken, my shoulder blade was sticking through my skin and my collar bone was driven inward. My whole left side was shattered. The Frenchman was sitting with his back against a broken turret, holding a large wound together with one hand as he bound it with the other.

"'What happened?' I cried.

"'Nothing,' answered monsieur, 'only the Chinese made an excellent shot, hit the turret, and killed everyone but us. The doctor says you are going to die and I shall live. I am sorry to have to bid you good-bye.'

"'Thank yer,' I said, in as pleasant a tone as I could, and I turned my head to die, looking at the belching guns of the enemy, and again lapsed into unconsciousness. When I came out of the hospital I was unacquainted with the new features they had given me. I collected my two hundred yen a day for the time I was in the Mikado's service, and then I departed for America.

"Just before the Russo-Japanese war broke out a letter came to me down in the Yakui valley, where I was working on a hole in the ground expecting to run across a vein of gold. It said they wanted engineers and I was offered four hundred yen a day to take risks. Did I accept? Well, I take risks mostly for nothing, and here was two hundred dollars a day for amusing myself. It wasn't very long before I was on a Pacific liner bound for the Mikado's island empire.

"My first job was advisory agent to the transport officers, who were the most make-shift men I have ever seen. Things must go according to learning, or they don't go, with the Jap. The war had been going on some time, and the Japanese were shaking up General Stossel pretty badly. Sixteen miles east of Port Dalney the Japs were landing their troops, who were marching inland to attack the Russians, who were holding the railroad between Port Arthur and Harbin. The Japanese were marching parallel to the line and were fast getting out of touch with their base of supplies. Besides this the Cossack sharpshooters were doing some splendid work as the daily line of Japanese wounded that poured through Dalney proved.

"At Dalney there were hundreds of tons of worn-out rails, which had been discarded by the Russians, useless, I guess, to anyone but an American. The Japanese generals, alarmed at their heavy losses, said that further advance against the Russians must cease until railroad material arrived from some foreign port. They were in a 'blue funk,' as the Britishers say, when I suggested that they make use of the old rails, and any old wood for ties. The Japanese regarded me in wonder.

"'That stuff is worn out,' said the general I put my proposition up to.

"'Well,' said I, 'it'll be worn in again if you give me my way.' And to my surprise they did.

"Within twenty-four hours I had a bunch of coolies at my command, and was soon making a railroad out of discarded material. We were not ten miles out when the Cossack scouts started to pick off my workmen with such regularity that I estimated that I lost a man for every twenty ties put down. Even with such a terrific handicap I laid two miles of track a day, and as the rolling stock was arriving in pieces and being assembled at Dalney very rapidly, the Japs looked on the venture with high hopes, and were doing me all sorts of honor. Nevertheless I had my doubts about living long enough to complete the road to where the Japanese intended to make a base.

One after another the coolies fell, and one after another new ones stepped into their places.

"One day, under a sudden attack, three-quarters of my working force was wiped out and I beat a hasty retreat, bolting towards Dalney on the little engine that was used for pushing my trucks about. The engine was not much faster than a horse and we had a devil of a running fight for some five miles, but succeeded in outstripping the Cossacks.

"On my arrival at Dalney there was a huge Japanese army waiting to be transported to the front, and there was a huge look of disappointment on the faces of the generals when I told them the situation.

"'Well, you give up the road, eh?'

"'No,' I said, 'give me some men and a Colts machine gun and I build it or die.'

"They smiled but I got the gun and before the sun set that day I was on my way to the head of the line in command of a company of Japanese and a machine gun. Never in the world's history, I think, was a railroad built under such difficulty; to start with, the route was unsurveyed, and I could not read the Japanese outline maps, which were nothing but a jumble of dots to me, like an astronomical chart. Then there was the everlasting whistle of Cossack bullets and the continual thinning out of the soldiers who defended the line, as well as the workers.

"Anyway, I got the track down, two miles a day, with bridges. Often I had to use my Remington or Luger for personal defense when we were rushed by a daring company of Russian horsemen. The further we got into the country the more fighting we had to do. We had been working thirty-one days when things got too hot. I sent for reinforcements, and the Japanese heliographed back, 'Do not give up the line; every Japanese will die with you if you will hold it. They are all patriots. Reinforcements sent.'

"Fine sentiments, and it looked as if I was not going to spend my four hundred yen a day. I heliographed back O. K. and as though trying my grit, ten minutes later a column of Cossacks swept into view. Then hell broke loose. I jumped on the truck and got a coolie to hand me ammunition as fast as I could shoot it from my machine gun at the Russians. The Japanese soldiers were brave enough but not good shots, and I saw them falling all around without inflicting much damage on the enemy. Besides that the Russians brought up a shell throwing machine gun and opened fire on mine. Here the coolies gave an exhibition of extraordinary stoicism, for they went on laying the track whilst the bullets flew as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

"My gun was getting hot, my men were almost wiped out, and the continual bursting of the enemy's shells was making my head swim, at the same time I had the satisfaction of knocking over dozens with the machine gun. Not satisfaction because I hated the enemy; I did not; but the satisfaction of knowing I was as good a shot as I was in my boyhood days down in South Carolina.

"Well, things were going against me, and I had just decided to run, when a sudden stinging sensation filled my head and—further interest in the fight, I took none.

"When I came round I was lying under a soldier's overcoat beside my railroad line. A big Japanese army was camped on the ground, and a couple of hundred dead Cossacks and Japanese were lying in mixed heaps about me. I sat up and my head swam so much that I fell back to the ground. A war correspondent, named William Dinwiddie, of New York, I think, came up and spoke. 'Can I do anything for you, old man? Have a drink?'

"I sure did.

"'You are very lucky,' said the writer. 'A fight has raged around you for two days, and two hundred or more have fallen in a hand-to-hand struggle around you, whilst you were unconscious from the wound in your head. The Japanese general ordered that you be rescued at any cost, he wanted you to finish the railroad, if you could.'

"'Well, why don't they give me some attention,' I asked.

"'Because the doctor said you were of no further immediate use to them as your eye was injured by a bullet, and you would be laid up any way. I tell you, your work has saved the Japanese from a serious check.'

"Well, to finish the story, I contributed one eye and a quart of blood to the glory of the Mikado's empire, and I was durned thankful I had one eye left to see myself spending the four hundred yen a day that I got for my trouble. Besides that I invented that machine which will revolutionize railroad track laying, which will mean more than four hundred yen a day to me and that little lady you see leading me around."